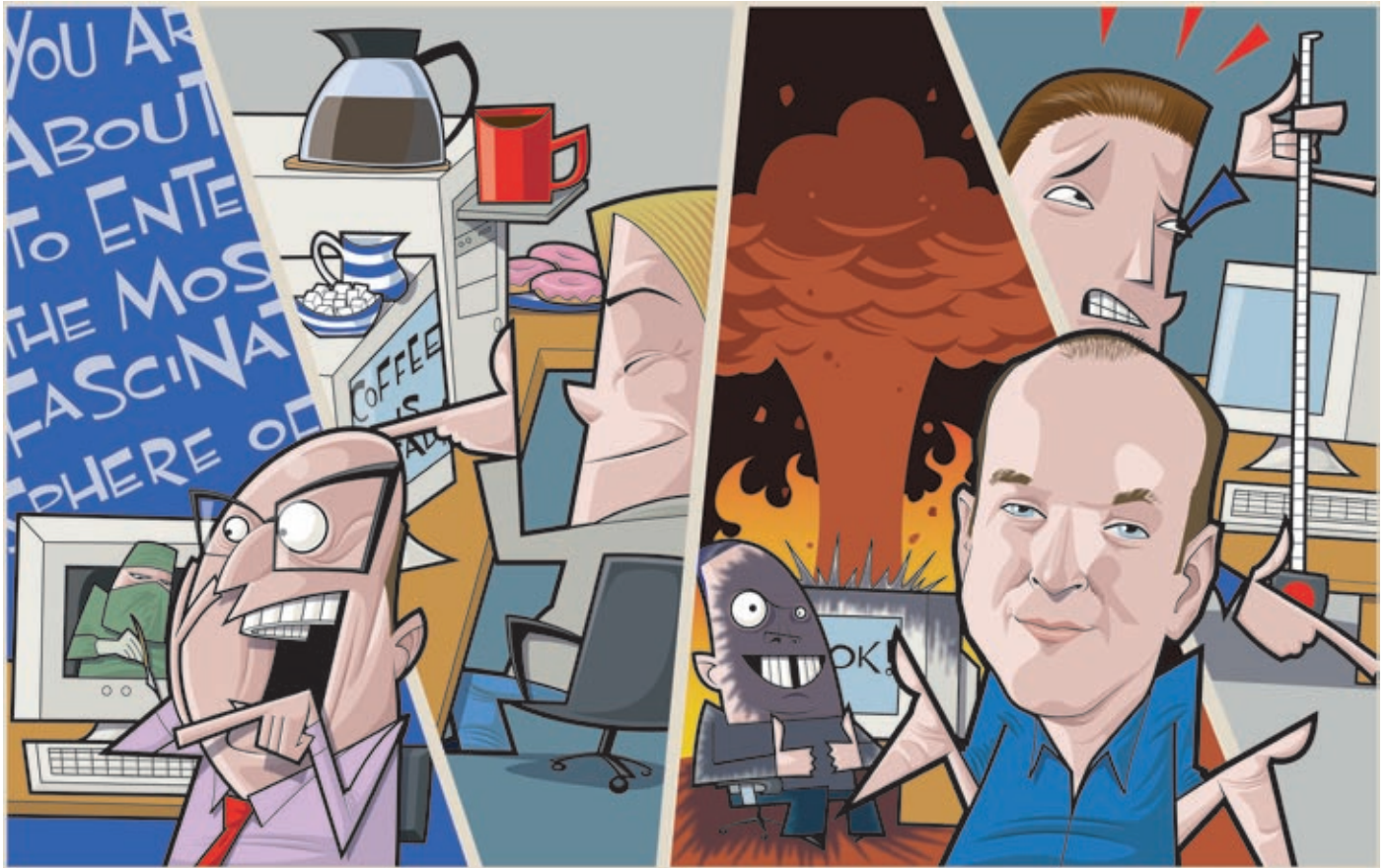




Presenting BRITAIN'S DUMBEST COMPUTER USERS

When computers fail, it's tempting to blame the machine, the manual or the manufacturer. But, as Simon Edwards explains, it's often the result of our own shockingly dumb antics. Prepare to meet your inadequacies head-on as we present Britain's dumbest computer users

ILLUSTRATION: KEVIN FEBRUARY

We all have problems with our PCs at some point in our lives, and it's tempting to take out our frustrations on faceless technical support staff whose mission in life seems to be to make a bad situation worse. It's easy to forget that those same technicians sitting on the other end of the phone have to deal with a public that is, by and large, utterly clueless.

We spoke to technical support staff from some of the country's biggest PC dealers and gathered their favourite true tales of idiotic customers and strange PC problems. Some of the stories we've heard are so outrageous as to be almost unbelievable. If our sources weren't so reliable, we'd think they were spreading urban legends.

SILLY GAMES

We've selected the very best of these stories and presented them in the technicians' own words. Please note that all names have been removed to protect the identities of the dumb users and the kind people at technical support. We've also mixed in some of the more common, but no less amusing, urban legends that do the rounds on the internet. Can you tell the difference between the genuine and the tall tales? Now's your chance to find out!

To take part in our Britain's Dumbest Users quiz, read each story and decide if it's true or false. Tick the box at the bottom of each item you think is true. Once you've completed the quiz, check your answers at the bottom of the last page. There are bonus points if you can work out which atrocities were committed by *Computer Shopper* staff.





1

DRIVING SEAT

“A customer returned his computer because the tray of his CD-ROM drive was broken. He told us that the PC had been placed on a desk, and his two-year-old daughter had worked out that if she ejected the drive, she could reach up, grab it and use it as leverage to support her weight as she climbed up to gain access to Daddy’s desk. This worked for a while, but she became older and grew heavier and the tray eventually snapped. To be fair to the man, he admitted it was his fault and paid for a new drive.” □

2

THE LISTENING PC

“The customer had been doing some work on his PC while sitting in the living room. He left the room for a moment and returned to see random but real words appearing on his word processor. He ran two different anti-virus programs and a variety of other troubleshooting utilities to no effect. He checked that no wireless keyboards were in range too. After a while we worked out that his TV was on, as was the voice recognition software on his computer. The PC was making a poor transcript of *Quincy*.” □

3

HAIRBRUSHES IN CONTROL

“One of the most frequent calls we get to our company is when someone finds that they keep accidentally copying files on their PC when they simply want to drag and drop a file. They can get very upset and frustrated about it, and they often think that they have picked up a virus. Most of the time the culprit is a hairbrush that is pressing down on the Ctrl key of the keyboard. Sometimes it’s other objects, but usually it’s a hairbrush.” □

4

FROZEN EMAIL

“A customer’s email wasn’t working, although the PC was OK and she could connect to the internet. The username and password were being accepted by our servers, but when Outlook started to download the email it appeared to freeze. She’d made dozens of attempts, taking an hour or so each time, but couldn’t get her mail. We logged in using a web interface and found she had been sent a few digital photos. It was taking longer than she thought, and every time she reconnected the entire download had to start again.” □

5

PC DRINKS HOLDER

“A customer called our technical support number and attempted to claim on his warranty because his PC’s cup holder had broken. We asked, “What cup holder?” He said, “The one attached to the front of my computer.” Was this a promotional gift, perhaps given to him at a computer trade show or something like that? “No, it came with the computer. It has 16x written on it.” He had been ejecting the CD-ROM tray and using it to support his coffee cup. One morning the thin plastic tray snapped.” □

6

COME ALL YE UNFAITHFUL

“We had a series of strange calls from a woman who persistently pestered our female colleagues and asked slightly pervy questions, such as how many women did we employ, what did they do and so on. A manager intervened on the last call and had a word with her. The woman had found our technical support number on her family phone bill and grew suspicious, thinking that her husband was having an affair. Now she knows he’s a faithful husband but a clueless PC user.” □

7

BIOS LOTTERY

“A customer had bought a very large hard disk, and the BIOS of his motherboard couldn’t support disks of that size. He told us the motherboard’s make and model and we downloaded the BIOS update files and sent them on a floppy. The upgrade failed. It turned out that he’d just guessed the motherboard’s details. The update was entirely wrong and virtually killed the motherboard. The floppy interface didn’t work but the CD-ROM did, which was a miracle. We put the correct files on a CD and resurrected the PC.” □

8

MAGNETIC ATTRACTION

“When a customer complained that his PC didn’t work, we sent an onsite engineer twice and brought the PC to the workshop three times but it seemed fine to us. The engineer had built up a rapport with the client so, when a further claim came in that it wasn’t working, he dropped in at the customer’s home on the off-chance. The customer had not had time to prepare for the visit so the fridge magnets he used to stick notes to his PC, which rendered it useless, were still in place.” □

9

INFLATED DELIVERY

“Fourteen years ago, we received an Atari that needed to be repaired. The customer had sent in the system himself, using his own packaging. When we opened the box we discovered it contained a loose computer and a load of rubber scraps. The customer had packed the box with inflated balloons. These had naturally burst in transit. We all had a good laugh and thought, “What a plonker.” But he had vision. These days a quarter of our components are packaged for transit by being wrapped up with air bags.” □

10

SHORT CUTS

“• The customer called to say his CD didn’t fit into his CD drive because it was round and the tray is square.
• A laptop’s wireless networking interface wasn’t working. “Have you pressed the WiFi ‘On’ button?” we asked. No, he hadn’t.
• A customer couldn’t turn off their PC because they kept choosing Restart instead of Shutdown in Windows.
• One man couldn’t turn on his PC because he was using the power supply on/off button, not the On button on the front of the case.” □

11

MOTHERBOARD, WHERE ART THOU?

“We sell DIY PC kits that provide a load of components such as a motherboard, case, processor and memory, which you have to put together yourself. One customer screwed his motherboard directly to the metal case without using any mounting points. The resulting short circuit fried the motherboard and his memory completely. It’s obvious that he did this because of the tell-tale scratches on the case, but he claims otherwise.” □

12

PC ON FIRE

“After adding a new power supply to a perfectly good PC, the customer connected everything up and turned on the mains power. After a short and loud burst of crackling noise, there was a bad smell and a lot of flames. He had connected the floppy disk connector incorrectly, so the pins were plugged into the wrong holes. Aside from some melted power cables the PC – including the floppy drive – survived intact, although the CD-ROM drive above the floppy drive was rather badly scorched.” □



13 HANGING AROUND

“ We’ve seen similar stories to this on the internet, but I swear this one is absolutely true. A lady called the company to say that her mouse lead wasn’t long enough. In those days we shipped mice with very generous leads that were around one-and-a-half metres long, so we had a hard time trying to imagine how she could have come across this problem. It turned out that she thought you used a mouse like you would a sewing machine pedal, and she was trying to get it to reach all the way down to the floor. ”

14 STICKY SITUATION

“ A customer complained that his mouse wouldn’t work properly. It took us ages to work out what was wrong, and several of us clustered around the phone suggesting ideas. After some lengthy questioning, we found out what had happened. He had glued the mouse on to his desk, upside down, and was trying to use it by rolling the ball directly with his fingers. He couldn’t left- or right-click, of course. The technical support guy who took the call was laughing so much he was nearly sick. ”

15 DO NOT COPY

“ The customer was having problems reading files that had been sent to her on a floppy disk. After some discussion, one of our technicians asked her to send him a copy of the floppy disk so he could see what files she was talking about. I knew exactly what would happen when I heard him ask for a copy without explaining how to run the DOS program diskcopy. Sure enough, two days later and to the technician’s great surprise, a letter arrived for him containing a photocopy of a floppy disk. ”

16 SCANNER IN THE WORKS

“ More than one caller has asked us why they can’t get their optical character recognition (OCR) software working. They’ll say it just isn’t picking up the document that they want to convert to text. In each case, the user has been holding a sheet of paper up to the monitor screen, thinking that by installing the OCR software the computer will somehow be able to see and scan an image using the screen as a scanner. We’ve had similar calls to this about fax software too. ”

17 CRAMMING IT IN

“ Back in the days of 5¼" floppy disks, we received a call from a lady who said that her computer kept asking her to “insert a system disk” but she wasn’t able to fit it in. Something was physically stopping her. We discovered that the floppy drive, which had a single slot, was already stuffed with two other disks that she’d previously crammed in there. We’re still getting calls about this type of problem and we’ve found that people seem able to cram up to three floppies into a 3½" drive before it’s full up. ”

18 RANK RETURNS

“ When a customer returns a computer, we inspect the contents of the box and check the processor’s code to ensure the customer has not put in an older one, which sometimes happens. People have even gutted their PC’s case and put a breeze block in to fool the courier. We’ve also received a box marked with an official returns number that contained a basket of carrier pigeons, and we once got a box of full blood bags. We also received some imported Japanese hub caps that were worth more than the PC. ”

19 NULL MODEM

“ Before broadband became popular, we used to get hundreds of similar calls. Many users bought their first PC and wanted to access the internet. Frequently they believed that all they needed was the free ISP CD from the computer shop, or an AOL disc. They didn’t realise that they needed a modem too. Those who did have modems often didn’t realise that they had to connect it to a phone line. Even if they got as far as installing a modem, some failed to note that they can’t make and receive phone calls when the PC is dialled up. ”

20 DISAPPEARING WINDOWS

“ One user who’d tried software from a cover disc complained that Windows looked different and they couldn’t find Office. The disc contained a Linux distribution. When the PC rebooted it booted from the CD and the installation routine started. It asked if they wanted to replace Windows with Linux. The user didn’t read the warnings and clicked OK to everything, including offers to format the hard disk. They ended up replacing Windows with Linux by accident. ”

21 HARD TO HANDLE

“ While upgrading a client’s PC we added a significantly faster, bigger hard disk. The motherboard wasn’t able to cope with the new capacity and we had to mess around with an Ontrack Dynamic Disk Overlay to fool the BIOS into accepting the disk. Despite this minor complication, the job went smoothly. However, the customer was suspicious that we’d not supplied the correct equipment. His new hard disk had 10 times the capacity of the old one so why, he demanded to know, was it not 10 times bigger? ”

22 IT’S OK, REALLY

“ The customer was trying to install the PowerDVD utility, but was finding it hard going. They said that nothing was happening, and I asked how long they had been waiting. They had started the install on Wednesday and it was now Friday afternoon. I asked if there was a progress bar on the screen. “No,” they replied. I asked if there were any other messages and found out there was one saying, “Press OK to start installation.” I advised that they click this button and heard them say, “Oooh!” Problem solved. ”

ANSWERS

Give yourself one point for each correct answer. If you guessed which mistakes were made by a member of the *Computer Shopper* (CS) team, claim an extra point for each one you got right. 1 True; 2 True; 3 True; 4 True; 5 False; 6 True; 7 True (CS); 8 True; 9 True; 10 All true; 11 True; 12 True (CS); 13 True; 14 True; 15 True; 16 True; 17 True; 18 True; 19 True; 20 True; 21 True; 22 True.

There is a possible maximum of 24 points.

How did you do?

0-9 Your faith in humanity is misplaced. You’re either living in a dream or are constantly disappointed by the world.

10-14 You think well of people, giving them the benefit of the doubt. You enjoy life, but are aware that you are surrounded by idiots.

15-22 You know the score. Streetwise and cynical, no-one pulls the wool over your eyes. You didn’t laugh at any of these stories, you just saw opportunities to exploit the foolhardy.

23-24 You heard on the grapevine that it was Simon who emoliated his PC last month and that Ben was the fool who randomly guessed his motherboard’s make and model.

VERDICT

We really are that stupid. Only one of the stories here is an urban legend, although we wouldn’t be surprised to learn that someone has rested a cup in a CD-ROM drive. The rest of these tales, submitted by diligent but much-maligned technical support staff, illustrate how clueless we can be when it comes to using computers. ☹